



WOMEN AND HEALTH

Mothers2mothers: Help for HIV-Positive Women

By Maya Kulycky



Ntsiuoa Ralefifi, center, at a mothers2mothers support group at Mafeteng hospital in Lesotho. When she learned she was HIV positive she enrolled in the PMTCT program.

Gideon Mendel/Corbis for UNICEF

HIV/AIDS is epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa, but in Kenya, the nongovernmental organization mothers2mothers enables HIV-positive women and their families to live full lives despite the disease.

Teresa Njeri, a single mother in Kiambu, a northern suburb of Kenya's capital, Nairobi, has a dream. She wants to build a home for herself and her six-year-old son. Recently Teresa bought a plot of land. When she

looks out over it she pictures the house she plans to build, with three bedrooms, a "big kitchen" and a yard where her son can play. Teresa is confident and optimistic. But planning for a bright future, and having the means to make it a reality, is a

big change for her. Ten years ago Teresa was convinced that she and her son were going to die.

In 2001, Teresa was diagnosed as HIV-positive when she was five months pregnant. "The first thing that came to my mind was death," says Teresa. "All of my

hopes were shattered.” The nurse at the clinic told Teresa she could protect her baby from HIV, but the nurse “wasn’t convincing, she was not very sure.” Regardless, Teresa joined a prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) program. Meanwhile, she disclosed her status to her husband, who also tested HIV-positive. Like others who were afraid of the stigma associated with HIV, the couple hid their status. They separated shortly after the birth of their son, who is HIV-negative.

A few months later, Teresa was hospitalized and told she had AIDS. When her father discovered her status from the hospital staff, he told her family, who isolated her and took her son away to live in the family’s village. “So I was left alone, all alone in the world,” Teresa remembers.

Teresa fled, sought treatment and volunteered to speak to others with AIDS. But she says she still “didn’t have any focus in life. I didn’t have any hope. I didn’t know what to do.” Then Teresa found mothers2mothers, thanks to nurses in the hospital where she volunteered. They told her about mothers2mothers, and that the organization was seeking to hire women trained in PMTCT. Teresa applied and became a mothers2mothers mentor mother.

International Partnerships

Mothers2mothers — funded by USAID, PEPFAR (U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) and the CDC (U.S. Centers for Disease Control), the Elton John AIDS Foundation, Johnson & Johnson and other corporate and foundation partners — trains and employs HIV-positive mothers to be “mentor mothers” to provide counseling, education and support to newly diagnosed HIV-positive pregnant women and new mothers. It is an innovative, sustainable model of care at the forefront of prevention of mother-to-child HIV transmission. Mothers2mothers operates 680 sites in nine sub-Saharan African countries, reaching about 85,000 new pregnant women and new mothers a month.

The African continent is struggling under the burden of HIV/AIDS. Of the 33 million people carrying

HIV worldwide, 22 million live in sub-Saharan Africa. Ninety percent of HIV-infected babies are born in the region and 75 percent of the world’s HIV-positive pregnant women live in 12 African countries, according to studies done by AVERT (www.avert.org), the UNAIDS Regional Support Team for Eastern and Southern Africa (<http://www.unaids-srstes.org/unaids-priority/2-preventing-mothers-dying-and-babies-becoming-infected-h>) and the World Health Organization’s Universal Access Report 2010. Meanwhile, the region is desperately short of doctors and nurses.

Mothers2mothers fills a gap by enlisting HIV-positive mothers to counsel pregnant women about how testing and treatment can ensure their babies are born healthy and that, if necessary, they can get medication. Mentor mothers work beside doctors and nurses in health care facilities, helping patients understand, accept and adhere to the interventions that are prescribed. They are paid members of the medical team.

Empowering Women, Protecting Children

The results are clear. In Lesotho, data collected by mothers2mothers show that 92 percent of pregnant women who attended the organization’s instruction sessions three or more times took antiretroviral (ARV) medication during pregnancy, compared to 71 percent of those who attended once. Adhering to the ARV regime is critical to decreasing mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Furthermore, 97 percent of frequently-attending mothers2mothers clients get CD4 tests, which determine the number of T-helper cells with which the body combats infections. A CD4 test shows how advanced an HIV infection is and is a first step toward receiving the life-saving highly active antiretroviral treatment (HAART).

Women are empowered by the support they receive in mothers2mothers programs. They become peer educators who are role models in their communities, while earning a salary and gaining valuable work experience.



Mathakane Metsing carries her daughter at their home in Khatleng, Lesotho. She was helped by and now works for mothers2mothers as a peer educator.

Gideon Mendel/Corbis for UNICEF

Teresa credits mothers2mothers with giving her a sense of purpose. Her mothers2mothers colleagues encouraged her to pursue her college degree. She is studying community health and development. “I feel like God created me ... to talk to these women, and help them, empower them, encourage them,” she says.

Teresa points to her success in helping a pregnant woman from the traditional African religion of Wakorino, whose adherents often eschew professional medical

care. “I saw her when I was coming to work,” she says. She gave the woman her telephone number, and “the following day she called me and said, ‘I am here at the [hospital] gate.’” The woman tested HIV-positive. “I told her, ‘Don’t worry, because you are going to live a very long time.’ I disclosed my status to her.” Teresa convinced her to adhere to PMTCT treatment and deliver in the hospital. The woman gave birth to an HIV-negative child. “I feel like a star,” Teresa laughs.

Mothers2mothers is working to expand its reach to women in more countries and in countries where it currently operates. The impact is clear and the method is simple — a woman talking to another woman can help prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

Maya Kulycky is the global communications manager at mothers2mothers. She also lectures in political journalism at University of Cape Town, South Africa. She previously reported for ABC News and CNBC. A graduate of Johns Hopkins University, she received a master's degree from the University of London, Goldsmith's College, and a law degree from Yale Law School.